
WOODY ALLEN'S NEW YORK

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There was a time, not so long ago, when New York was less volatile and threatening, when its social desperation and agony seemed more manageable and avoidable. It was during that period--the Thirties through the Fifties--that Hollywood created a dream city both out of the iconography of New York's skyscrapers, penthouses, bridges, and neon lights, and out of the intense street rhythms and theatrics on the ground. Crime, poverty, and fear continued to exist on those celluloid streets (e.g., *Dead End* in the Thirties, the weariness and cynicism of the documentary-style *The Naked City* in the Forties), but the dominant tone inherent in Hollywood's depiction of the city was a buoyant one--cinematic New York, often even when it was corrupt, was a world of romantic possibility. And for decades that fiction about the city helped shape both its citizens, as well as a worldwide audience's vision of New York.

In Thirties' screwball comedies like *Easy Living* (1937), musicals like *On the Town* (1949) and *The Band Wagon* (1953), and romances like *The Clock* (1945), the mixture of carefully selected locations and artfully designed sets evoked an exhilarating and humane world. The city in *On the Town* could elicit the most exultant and joyous of responses from its central characters, three sailors played by Gene Kelly, Jules Munshin, and Frank Sinatra, inspiring them together with their female partners to lift their voices in song and kick up their heels in dance. In fact, the "helluva town" of historic landmarks and ethnic nightclubs that the three sailors giddily race about on their shore leave, the imaginatively designed 42nd street arcade in *The Band Wagon* where Fred Astaire dances with a shoeshine man, and *The Clock*'s wartime portrait of caring, earthy New York miklmen and idyllic nights in misty city parks along the Hudson, were almost the visual equivalent of Thomas Wolfe's overripe paeans to a city which had moved him to "grow drunk with ecstasy" and to feel that he "can never die."

Obviously, these cinematic evocations of the city never pretended to social realism or criticism. They were mainly interested in stylizing and mythologizing the social universe so an audience could escape into a more radiant, romantic, or exciting world for a couple of hours. The films were so constructed that all those small town, middle Americans in the audience could identify with their counterparts in *On the Town* and *The Clock*, wandering around wide-eyed in the big city. Even in films which portrayed poverty in the New York slums and were genuinely concerned with social issues, class animosity, and injustice, like William Wyler's *Dead End* (1937), urban social problems unfolded on a meticulously and beautifully constructed stage set and were strikingly augmented by cinematographer Greg Toland's use of deep focus and light and shadow. In *Dead End* every fire escape, tenement stoop, roof, garbage can, and huddle of people conveyed more of a calibrated esthetic effect than a statement about urban entrapment. From the vantage point of the Nineties, life in *Dead End*'s New York slum,

despite its poverty and violence, looks pretty good--a vital neighborhood with a river view which was ripe for the kind of gentrification the film depicts as already in process. The movie industry repeatedly used New York to project an image of a city that would excite the collective imagination and fantasies of its audience, offering them either upper class glamor and success or working class warmth and folksiness. The cinematic city was centered in neighborhoods like a moneyed, chic Upper East Side, a charming, bohemian Greenwich Village, a communal but impoverished Lower East Side, and a daffy, distinctively accented Brooklyn, whose mere mention would elicit laughs from movie audiences throughout the country. For the moviegoing public of the time, Brooklyn was the apotheosis of all the kind-hearted, good-humored, raw, democratic virtues of America's urban, ethnic common man. And New York's fire escapes, pushcarts, town houses' elevated trains, office buildings, art galleries, night clubs, and quaint, checkerboard tableclothed Italian restaurants dominated Hollywood's vision of the city in films ranging from screwball comedies like *The Awful Truth* (1937) to film noir classics like Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945). In the noir films the dark, shadowy, glistening wet streets of the studio back lots whetted the audience's appetite for fashionable corruption. For Hollywood, setting a film in a large city, more often than not, meant placing it in New York.

Since the mid-Sixties, however, as the city began to unravel--its social problems more insoluble, its middle class leaving for the suburbs, the underclass growing in numbers and menace--Hollywood's image of New York began to change. From *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) through Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) to Lumet's *Q & A* (1990), to countless, violent exploitation films, New York has been portrayed on the screen as a traumatized city overwhelmed by drug dealers, prostitutes, and street criminals, permeated with garbage-laden streets and graffiti-scarred buildings, and with a jarring symphony of sirens and alarms constantly playing as an accompaniment in the background. Even so, this cinematic nightmare vision of New York can still make the city seem seductive. Scorsese's city in *Taxi Driver* is perversely beautiful and galvanizing--a rancid night world of steam hissing from manhole covers, hydrants spouting streams of water, and ominous figures shimmering in the oppressive summer heat. It's an inversion of the dream city--a luminous portrait of urban rot and foreboding--and it's almost as phantasmagoric a view of the city as *On the Town*'s sanitized version of an earlier, more serene New York. *Taxi Driver* remains the hallucinatory vision of one singular director in collaboration with his scriptwriter, Paul Schrader, with both men more interested in projecting their personal obsessions and demons onto the New York urban landscape than in documenting its social breakdown.

Despite the film being conceived and shot from the point of view of Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), a character who is a paranoid and a psychopath, Scorsese's New York remains touched with a great deal of gritty reality. Living in New York there is no avoiding the precariousness and edginess which suffuses a great many urban encounters and neighborhoods, and the film echoes that sense of public danger and decay. Still, even in the turbulent New York of the Nineties, a city in constant financial and social crisis--a dark, sinister film like *Taxi Driver* offers up only one of many possible, very different New Yorks.

Clearly there are other visions of New York that can be conjured up on the screen. A film like Nancy Savoca's *True Love* (1989) provides an unsentimentally realistic portrait of Bronx working class Italian-Americans who live in a coherent world whose public life is neither violent nor fragmented. In fact, in *True Love*'s Bronx, the characters' confusion and pain is not brought on by social desperation or alienation, but by the communal and familial pressure to conform to traditional codes of male and female behavior. In *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Spike Lee creates a Brooklyn block devoid of drugs or street violence and crime--a softened (artificially and radiantly lit), relatively benign version of an inner city street. It's a block whose sense of community owes more to Thirties films about white working class life, like Vidor's *Street Scene* (1931), than to inner city life in the Nineties. Other Hollywood films use Soho, the Upper East Side, and Wall Street to capture arty, stylish, and high living slices of the city, which, if neither spiritual sanctuaries nor totally cut off from the city's agony, are physically comfortable, livable, and, to many, desirable worlds.

The most powerful antidote in films to the nightmare vision of New York is conveyed by Woody Allen. From *Bananas* (1971) to *Alice* (1990), most of Allen's films use New York locations and treat the city as one of the prime subjects of his work. Allen's city is foregrounded, it's one more character in his films. It's never merely used as a visually interesting or picturesque background for the narrative to evolve in or to complement the interaction of his characters. His Manhattan is an extension of Allen's protagonist's personalities--its streets are places to walk in, hold conversations, have random and absurd encounters, reflect on both one's private angst and the city's plight, and mute or escape one's anxieties. New York is also a public projection of Allen's protagonists' generally best selves and moments--a city of infinite promise, possibility, and grandeur. It's a city where, in Allen's most famous image in *Manhattan* (1979), with Isaac (Allen) and Mary (Diane Keaton) romantically silhouetted, sitting on a bench in the beckoning shadows of the Queensborough Bridge at dawn, Isaac can unambiguously assert, "This is really a great city, I'm knocked out."

Allen's New York is the sum of the striking and chic neighborhoods and icons his camera focuses on either in glorious long shot or in more intimate tracking shots--Fifth and Madison Avenues, Central Park West, Bloomingdale's, Lincoln Center, the Hayden Planetarium, the Plaza, Zabar's, the Russian Tea Room, the Dakota, and so on. His city is basically limited to a large fragment of one borough, Manhattan--though both *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Radio Days* (1986) reconstruct scenes from his central characters' boyhoods in Brooklyn and Rockaway, the other boroughs are usually treated as if they have been severed from the city--an upscale section that runs from the Upper West Side through Central Park to the Village and Soho and from the East 80s to Gramercy Park. There are scenes set on the Columbia University campus with its grand McKim, Mead, and White buildings, but Harlem, Washington Heights, and even the Lower East Side barely make an appearance in his films.

Of course, Allen is no neorealist like early De Sica or a cinema-verite documentarian like Frederick Wiseman, who, in one of his recent works, exhaustively compiled footage of much of the daily activity which takes place in Central Park. Allen's films aren't interested in exploring urban problems like racial tensions, AIDS, or crime,

nor does he have an interest in providing a composite, wide-ranging portrait of urban life. His New York has a narrow social and racial base, it's limited to an upper-middle class world of WASPs and Jews who are primarily artists, academics, or media people--people who share his world and values and are able to evoke some empathy from him. In this New York, the poor, Afro-Americans, and Hispanics play almost no role. In fact, they don't even have bit parts in Allen's films.

As one can see, Allen's vision of the city is a carefully selective one--a world where social pain and threat never intrude on the private lives and agonies of his characters. It's a city of dreams whose streets range from a cool, symmetrical Park Avenue with its groomed green medians to the raw, powerful, cast-iron building blocks of Soho. Allen's directorial eye doesn't look only at life on the streets, but also at the esthetics of the buildings themselves. As the architect David (Sam Waterston) says in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), "People pass by vital structures in this city all the time, and they never take the trouble to appreciate them." Allen forces us to look closely at the peeling posters and classical pediments that adorn the Soho loft buildings, the terra cotta reliefs on the richly decorated Alwyn Court building on 58th Street and Seventh Avenue, and the grace and elegance of the tapering Art Deco towers and gargoyles on the Chrysler Building.

In Manhattan, Allen's protagonist is writing a novel about a hero who "thrived on the hustle and bustle of the crowds and the traffic." But the films keep the city's fever pitch, collective anxiety, and chaos under control. Allen's depiction of Central Park illustrates this perfectly. Allen is so urban-oriented and committed a director that he treats the natural world in his films as a comic antagonist--as a landscape in which his protagonists are totally ill at ease. The only natural space that he can tolerate and embrace in his films is Central Park, which he treats as both his backyard and version of the pastoral ideal, albeit an urbanized one, surrounded by magnificent edifices like the Beresford apartment building on its West Side and the Guggenheim on its East. And in his vision of the park, the litter, noise, homeless people, and crowds at mass events that are an integral part of its reality have been removed from view. What is left is a relatively quiet oasis--the ideal of its original nineteenth century designers, Olmstead and Vaux--where one can watch the change of seasons, count lovers in hansom carriages and boats on the lake, and play ball with one's son on the Great Lawn. One can even seek the meaning of life in a discussion with a Hare Krishna follower, in a luminous scene in *Hannah...*, where the screen is split into three bands--at the top a dusky blue sky, in the middle a delicately shadowed, glowing gold-green Sheep's Meadow where Hare Krishna followers are dancing, and, at the bottom of the frame, an anguishridden Mickey (Allen) in search of the meaning of life. The park here is transformed into a slice of paradise, providing a moment of utter relief for a man in emotional difficulty.

An image in Manhattan of Central Park enveloped in snow, harking back to nineteenth century Currier & Ives prints, is also part of Allen's opening montage in homage to the city. This breathtaking montage and the film itself resurrects the New York of memory that Allen loves. It's a New York which is a fitting object of a grand passion--the city of Dixieland, Willie Mays, Cole Porter, and the Marx Brothers. The montage itself is built on voluptuous images of an incandescent Park Avenue in winter, Broadway's neon lights,

a dramatic aerial view of Yankee Stadium at night, mixed with images catching the everyday vitality of the streets, culminating in a crescendo of fireworks lighting up the night sky over Central Park, all accompanied by Gershwin's pulsating "Rhapsody in Blue" on the soundtrack.

These are contemporary, familiar New York images, shot in a dazzling high contrast black and white rather than color, which Allen utilizes to project the city's continuity with, from his perspective, its more elegant and civilized past. These fabulistic images also act as a self-conscious reminder of the way many old Hollywood films once projected a portrait of a city that gleamed and soared. Of course, Allen's vision of New York is more deeply felt, personal, and knowing than Minnelli's in *The Band Wagon* or the coy portrait of supposedly 'liberated' Greenwich Village life in *My Sister Eileen* (1955). It's the city as seen by a man who, without too many illusions and full awareness of New York's social sores ("drugs, garbage, crime"), continues to love and burnish it ("New York was his town, and it always would be"), and steadfastly refuses to allow New York's real tawdriness to encroach on his vision of the heavenly city. Allen is not uncritical of the city in Manhattan, but the brunt of his critique is cultural rather than social and political. In the opening voice-over in *Manhattan*, Isaac intones that his novel will be about "New York as a metaphor for the decay of contemporary culture." But it's not the city's gnawing poverty, the breakdown of its social services, its gratuitous violence, or its crumbling infrastructure that Allen is concerned with. The decay he inveighs against is his friends and social milieu's penchant for self-indulgently betraying their talents and relationships. It's that insecure, shallow, narcissistic, name-dropping world which the moralist in Allen is angered by. His character Isaac's prime insight is that "people in Manhattan are constantly creating these unnecessary neurotic problems for themselves because it keeps them from dealing with the terrible, unsolvable problems of the universe"--like death.

Taken as cultural analysis, Allen's attack on modern decadence is itself specious and shallow--a mixture of cafeteria existentialism and some genuine revulsion with a milieu of which he is a member in good standing. But nobody asks Allen to be a De Tocqueville, Marx, or even a Christopher Lasch--it's sufficient that his satirical thrusts at sophisticated Manhattan behavior often hit their mark. Despite his censure, it's this same Manhattan which Allen's characters, like Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall*, trek over the Brooklyn Bridge to passionately embrace and defend. In *Radio Days*, Allen's skillfully crafted, nostalgic evocation of growing up in Rockaway in the late Thirties and the WWII years to old radio programs like *The Green Hornet* and pop songs like "Lay that Pistol Down," Manhattan is always there to provoke a boy's fantasies. In this sentimental film, built around a series of vignettes, lower-middle class Rockaway is not an oppressive world. It is remembered as an utterly domesticated, innocent neighborhood of teenage girls sitting in soda shops and sighing in unison while listening to crooners on the radio, a neighborhood where violence in school was no more than a spitball fight, and sex was just boys hungrily looking through binoculars at a nude, Rubenesque woman dancing in her apartment to the strains of "Babalu." These Rockaway memories are filled with charm and warm feeling, Allen even granting the clamorous, insensitive family life of his young alter ego--a nearsighted, quietly

irreverent boy named Joe--a semi-Edenic glow. All the family's abrasion--his uncle telling his aunt "to take the gaspipe"--is treated as a comic conceit, and the neighborhood cozily encompasses white beaches and piers to walk out to the ocean on. Still, underlying these soft-focused reminiscences is the strong feeling that neighborhood life is constricted and that home life is nothing more than a place where Joe's family settles down to tedious evenings of endless bidkering, playing cards, washing the dishes, and listening to the radio. It is Manhattan, with its radio quiz shows, restaurants with cheek to cheek dancing, and a Radio City Music Hall with carpeted corridors and grand spaces, that Joe truly longs for.

It's Manhattan in *Radio Days*, both the real and the imagined one, which provides Allen's young protagonist with a sense of transcendence. The pleasure and excitement of his infrequent trips to Manhattan is reinforced by radio programs like the breakfast show over which 'Roger and Irene' preside. It is a show that conjures up images of sophisticated people living in glamorous Manhattan penthouses, spending their evenings at the Stork Club, formally dressed for dancing and engaging in civilized adultery and urbane chitchat with other radio celebrities. The film, however, does not romanticize the celebrities--they're unprepossessing, somewhat absurd figures. But for Allen the high style and success that this Manhattan world provides is clearly preferable to the more prosaic virtues of Jewish, lower-middle class Rockaway. It's not that Allen repudiates his own ethnicity or roots: his persona, especially in the early films, is modeled after the classic Jewish victim-schlemiel; Alvy Singer is obsessed with anti-Semitism and jokes about his Jewish identity and past in *Annie Hall* and *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) is, on one level, a homage to Jewish Catskill comics. It's not, however, Jewish upper middle class suburban life young Joe dreams about, but a cosmopolitan Manhattan, with all its spiritual imperfections (and, given Allen's recent romantic revelations and travails, an emotionally more Dostoyevskian and anguished Manhattan than any of his films have conveyed) that the adult Allen now inhabits.

In a concluding voice-over in *Radio Days*, Allen speaks of these memories as growing dimmer with each passing year. But it's clear from Allen's films that the stylized memories of a magical Manhattan New Year's Eve in *Radio Days* moonlit skies, gossamerlike snow flakes, and a large neon Camel sign blowing smoke- still vividly color and shape his vision of the New York present.

Allen's New York is very different from the city of streets filled with wandering, dispossessed souls, shards of broken glass, ruined buildings, and sporadic, murderous gunfire that characterizes the New York films of Scorsese and Lumet. He has consciously projected a city which may not be celestial, but comes as close as possible to a luminous "city on the hill." from the daily reality of dire social and economic statistics and screaming headlines, but, in this city of continual flux, there are still neighborhoods, streets, and moments where the dreamscape is ascendant. Allen's indelible urban images offer consolation and hope for those who believe that the delicate balance between dream and nightmare in New York will be preserved into the next century.